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PACIFIC REFLECTIONS: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF AID AND DEVELOPMENT

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Development Studies Network

Development and change: Reflections on tourism in the South Pacific

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Introduction

The South Pacific[1] has long conjured up romantic images of lush, tropical beauty in the minds of many outsiders. From the days of the early colonial explorations to the present, the Pacific region has to some extent, maintained its image as an ideal travel destination. Understanding this island allure, tourism was introduced to a number of South Pacific countries as an alternative source of foreign exchange earnings to traditional sectors such as agriculture and fisheries, and a good generator of employment opportunities (Latimer 1985). The low resource base, limited land resources, and geographical isolation of many of the small island states in the region made large-scale industrial development difficult, creating the pathway for encouraging tourism as a viable development tool (Hall and Page 1996). It was able to expand significantly after the advent of commercial air travel in the 1950s, with an international airport in Nadi leading the surge in tourism to Fiji in particular (Donnelly, Quanchi and Kerr 1994). During the following decades a number of former colonies gained independence, and tourism was widely promoted as a means to realising national aspirations and sustaining economic ambitions (Britton 1982; Movono, Harrison and Pratt 2015).

In this paper we consider how tourism has been shaped in the South Pacific between 1984, when *Development Bulletin* was first published, and the present time, 2018, when this journal celebrates its 80th issue. Reflecting on the literature from the past four decades suggests that if tourism is to be an effective driver of development in the interests of the people and environments of the South Pacific then appropriate regional frameworks must be developed to ensure that governments commit to strategic initiatives for its sustainable development. In the era of the Sustainable Development Goals it is important that social, economic and environmental aspects of tourism development are all considered.

Tourism in the South Pacific: Changes over time

Political commitment along with advances in aviation led to the rise in tourism's prominence in the Pacific in the late 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the larger and more accessible island states (Rao 2002). Tourism was quickly coined as the 'backbone of economies' and, in Fiji's case, as a 'new kind of sugar'; tourism replaced the sugar industry as the largest foreign exchange earner in this country by 1984 (Prasad 2014). Even countries that were initially reluctant to pursue tourism due to concerns about negative socio-cultural impacts, came to embrace this industry. In Samoa, for example, it was the devastating impacts of two major cyclones and taro blight on the agricultural system in the early 1990s that led to pursuit of tourism growth (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998).

In 1984, Fiji was the region's top destination, with French Polynesia and New Caledonia claiming strong second and third positions. By 2017 Fiji still led the way followed by French Polynesia, but with Cook Islands and Samoa close behind (Figure 1, next page). Interestingly, in the period between 1984 and 2017 the two French territories have shown growth rates much lower than the other major tourist destination in the Pacific (Table 1, below), with Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga and Fiji all achieving over 250 per cent growth, while growth was over 500 per cent in the Cook Islands and 700 per cent in Niue. While Papua New Guinea currently gets over 50,000 arrivals, which would seem significant, they are not included here as a major tourist destination as less than 20 per cent of their arrivals are holiday-related (Voigt-Graf 2015).

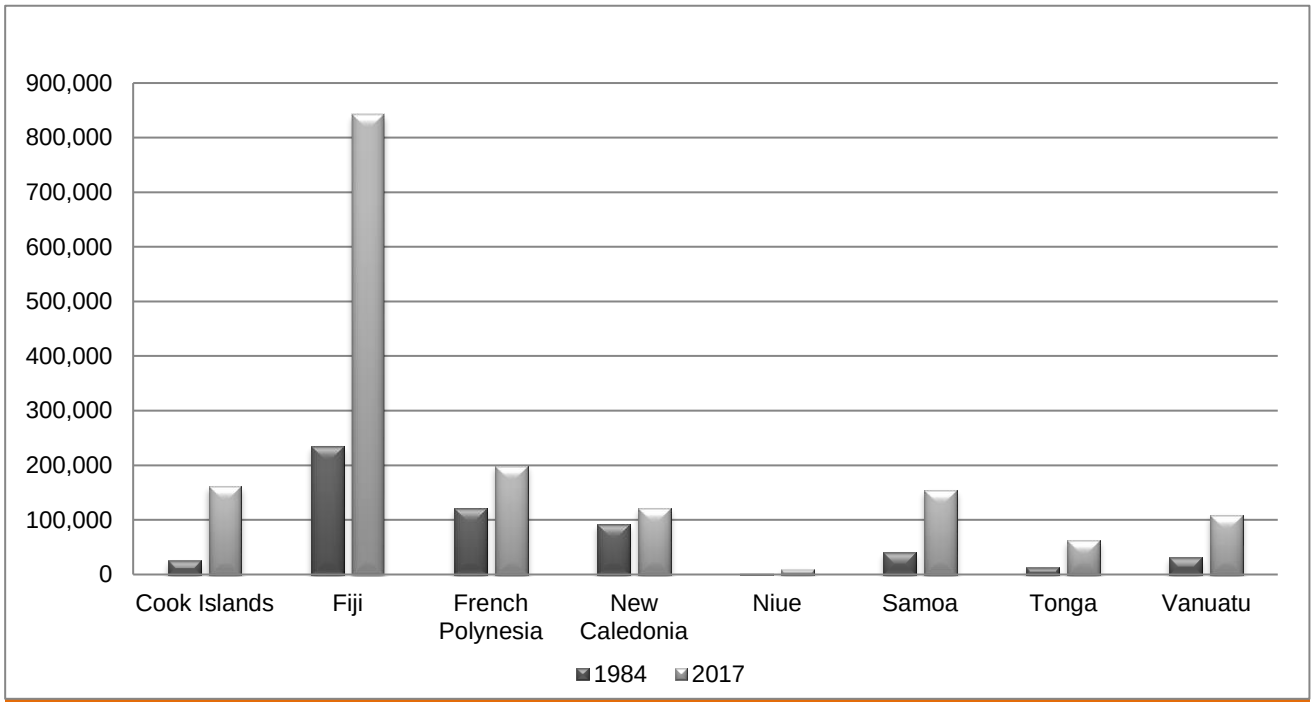
Table 1: Growth in visitor arrivals in major tourist destinations in the Pacific (1984 to 2017) re resident population

	Visitor arrivals		Total growth %	Population 2016/2017[3]	Arrivals/ Population ratio
	1984[1]	**2017**[2]			
Fiji	235,116	842,884	258.5	884,887	1.0
French Polynesia	120,209	198,956	65.5	275,918	0.7
New Caledonia	92,000	120,697	31.2	276,255	0.4
Samoa	40,430	155,098	283.6	197,611	0.8
Vanuatu	31,183	109,170	250.1	272,459	0.4
Cook Islands	25,587	161,362	530.6	11,700	13.8
Niue	1,150	9,805	752.6	1,618	6.1
Tonga	13,713	62,434	355.3	100,651	0.6
Total	**559,388**	**1,660,406**	**196.8**	**2,021,099**	**0.8**

Sources: 1. Milne 1990:16; Aldrich and Connell 1992:151 for New Caledonia; author estimate for French Polynesia;
2. SPTO 2018; Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2018;
3. National statistic departments; UN Population Division estimates for Niue and New Caledonia; 2016 values for Cook Islands, Vanuatu and Tonga.

By 2017, tourism earnings were significant, providing being between 10 and 70 per cent of GDP in eight South Pacific Island states, which are listed in Table 2. Note that this includes the Solomon Islands as, even though it only received 25,709 visitors in 2017 (SPTO 2018:3), they made a significant contribution to the country's GDP. All of the remaining destinations, including New Caledonia (which are featured in Figure 1 and Table 1) recorded shares of less than 10 per cent of GDP each (SPTO 2018:45). In addition, as a service sector highly dependent on catering to the whims of tourists, tourism employs relatively high numbers of people. In the Cook Islands and Niue, for example, tourism provides one in every three jobs. While significant, such figures actually underestimate the overall impact of tourism because there are indirect impacts on GDP and on job creation as well both through associated industries such as construction and retailing, whose growth is also partly attributed to tourism, for example, through construction of resorts and guest shopping habits.

Figure 1: Visitor arrivals in major tourist destinations in the Pacific, 1984 and 2017



Sources: Compiled from: Milne 1990; Aldrich and Connell 1992; SPTO 2018; Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2018. Table 1: Growth in visitor arrivals in major tourist destinations in the Pacific (1984 to 2017) re resident population.

Table 2: Tourism earnings as a share of GDP, and share of employment in tourism, in major destinations in the South Pacific

	Tourism as a share of GDP %	Employment %
Cook Islands	69.1	34.4
Vanuatu	46.1	26.0
Niue	41.0	32.3
Fiji	40.3	13.9
Samoa	20.4	9.0
Tonga	18.2	19.1
French Polynesia	11.8	8.3
Solomon Islands	10.2	3.1

Source: SPTO 2018:45.

The figures seen here reflect the importance of tourism to the economic development of these countries yet concurrently, demonstrate their dependence on this somewhat fickle industry. Over the years there have been concerns about potential long-term effects of civil crises, especially three coup d'état in Fiji over 20 years (Harrison and Pratt 2010), as well as unrest in other countries including the Solomon Islands and Tonga. Global financial downturns and health scares have also deterred people from undertaking long haul trips to the South Pacific for vacations. Undoubtedly the greatest concern, which is already starting to impact these countries, is around environmental shocks and natural disasters. Climate change is leading to the increasing frequency and severity of events such as cyclones. For example, when Tropical Cyclone Winston hit Fiji in February 2016 it was the most severe cyclone ever recorded in the southern hemisphere, reaching Category 5. Winston significantly impacted on 40 per cent of the population and caused widespread damage to homes,

businesses, infrastructure and crops, leading to the closure over many months of a number of tourism enterprises (OCHA 2016). Despite this, and the chequered political history of Fiji, tourism numbers show continued growth. For example, there were 754,835 arrivals in 2015, and this jumped to 792,320 in 2016, the year that Winston struck, and in 2017 this grew again to 842,884 visitors (SPTO 2018:3). The tourism industry in most South Pacific countries has, thus, proven to be relatively resilient.

Consistent concerns regarding tourism from the 1980s-2000s

Few would question that tourism has been an important economic sector for a number of South Pacific countries in recent decades. Nevertheless, tourism scholars from the 1980s through to the present time have consistently raised a number of concerns about tourism growth in the region, leading them to question the validity of development approaches being used. Key concerns will be discussed below.

Region-wide, tourism development is regarded as following a predominantly modernisation-driven approach, largely mimicking external developmental philosophies. This is generally characterised by high levels of foreign investment and ownership, limited local participation and inadequate stimulation of local industries (Hall and Page 1996; Movono, Harrison and Pratt 2015).[2] The high external ownership further limits the earning potential of Pacific Island states that have to contend with the high repatriation of profits and high rates of expatriate involvement in managerial roles (Prasad 2014). The current situation is the result of previous and ongoing patterns and principles of development that were identified back in the 1980s by Steven Britton (1982). Britton (1982; see also Britton and Clarke 1987) was a particularly influential scholar, using a political economy lens to show how tourism was exploiting the resources and labour power of countries such as Fiji. He was backed up in many ways by authors such as Bastin (1984) and Milne (1990) whose work showed that despite job creation and the earning of export revenues, the sector extracted a lot more from the Pacific than it gave back.

During this period Rajotte and Crocombe (1980) made an important contribution to discussions of the relative value of tourism by reflecting the voices of Pacific peoples on the issue in their book *Pacific Tourism, As Islanders See It*, revealing both positive and negative views about the impacts of this industry. Kanemasu (2015) has since argued that much of the discontent and ambivalence shown by Fijians towards tourism over recent decades, can be associated with fundamental inequities in the sharing of benefits from this industry. Samy (1980:67) referred to host communities only receiving 'crumbs from the master's table', with the Pacific tourism industry paying some of the lowest wage rates in the world. Certainly research shows that despite growth in tourism revenues, the poor are not benefiting: '…indigenous Fijian participation in the tourism sector is predominantly as employees or as recipients of lease monies, and rarely as those directly involved in tourism planning and development, therefore limiting the pro-poor potential of the sector in Fiji' (Scheyvens and Russell 2012:417). Longstanding tourism academic in the region, David Harrison (2014) thus laments that employing a modernisation approach to development has ensnared Pacific Island states, limiting their potential to derive more benefits from tourism.

Furthermore, assertions made about tourism's potential to strengthen economic linkages still remain largely unverified with continuing high rates of importation of many hotel requirements, from furniture and fixtures to daily food and beverage items (see Berno 2006, on the need to bridge the tourism and agriculture industries). It is mainly the high-end, small capacity 'boutique' resorts that make a feature of their establishments the extensive use of local products and services, including utilising a lot of local produce on their menus (Scheyvens and Russell 2012).

Environmental and socio-cultural impacts of tourism are another cause of concern from the perspectives of local people. The tourism industry has high demands on fresh water and energy sources, and places enormous pressure on waste management systems. Due to the coastal location of many tourism properties, vulnerable coastal ecosystems are often degraded in the process of resort construction (McElroy 2003). Issues of negative socio-cultural impacts have also been raised regularly over the years. For example, Bolabola (1984) in her study of Fijian villages, lamented the commodification of specific Fijian carvings, which in her view, led to diminishing cultural value, further questioning the rationality of tourism as a driver of positive change. Scholars have raised a number of associated areas of concern from disruption of cultural practices and disrespect of traditions through to sexual exploitation of tourism sector workers (Britton 1982; Hall 1996; Pratt 2013; Movono, Harrison and Pratt 2015; Movono and Becken 2017; Sadaraka 2017).

The right hand column in Table 1 gives some indication of how the socio-cultural and environmental impacts will most likely vary from country to country, as this shows the ratio of visitor arrivals to the resident population. In Fiji, there are as many visitors in a year as there are residents, but in the Cook Islands, there are almost 14 times as many visitor arrivals than local residents. This impact is intensified when we recognise that the main island of Rarotonga 'hosts' the majority of these visitors. The impacts on the natural environment are clear: for example, a 2015 news report claimed that 'The golden egg is cracked', referring to sewage from tourist establishments and agriculture polluting Rarotonga's Muri lagoon, a major tourist drawcard (TV One News 2015). Sel Napa, a Member of Parliament, has called for the government to slow down tourist arrivals on Rarotonga, because of impacts on the environment and the strain on the island's infrastructure. She noted that the Asian Development Bank had warned the country that, to cope with high tourist numbers, substantial improvements were needed in the sewage system, along with waste management and recycling, power, roads and fresh water (Radio New Zealand 2017). Interestingly, we might be starting to witness a wave of anti-tourism/over tourism sentiment as evidenced in some European destinations such

as Barcelona in recent summers, along with other popular global destinations such as Bali, Indonesia and Maya Bay in Thailand (the latter made popular via the filming of the movie, *The Beach*) (Milano et al 2018). Some in the industry have claimed that the friendliness and traditional hospitality (*aroha*) towards tourists is declining, largely because they are dealing with the negative impacts of tourism while not getting a fair share of the benefits of tourism (Cook Islands News 2016).

Note that tourism-related studies have mainly been confined to those countries with higher levels of arrivals, especially Fiji, Vanuatu and the Cook Islands, thus much work remains to be done in drawing accurate perspectives about tourism across the South Pacific. Less accessible places with underdeveloped tourism infrastructure, such as Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, are going to struggle to attract and retain tourists. It is important that we are realistic about the possibilities of tourism, recognising that it is unlikely to be an economic saviour in every context. Even where it could bring economic gains, this needs to be carefully weighed against the likely environmental and socio-cultural impacts.

Discussion and ways forward

Undoubtedly, tourism is considered to have had an immense role in nation building and development in the region. It continues to provide vital export and tax revenue, to create formal sector jobs as well as opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises to thrive. The revenue raised by this industry has enabled a number of governments to feel confident in planning to meet the development needs of their people, while the jobs created have helped many thousands of Pacific peoples to improve their quality of life, advance their children's education, and so forth. Nevertheless the concerns that remain are significant. The steady increase in tourist arrivals to the region, although minute in global terms, is having lasting impacts on people and their culture in specific destinations, and putting pressure on island environments with limited resources and infrastructure to deal with rapid growth. Thus a more sustainable way of developing tourism across the region must be found in future.

Setting a regional agenda on sustainable tourism development requires an integrated approach that will inspire commitment and stimulate collective action in meeting the challenges of sustainable tourism development in a more focussed manner. This is a task which this paper proposes must be thoroughly discussed at all levels, from the community level through to the Pacific Islands Leaders Forum. In particular, more spaces should be created where tourism stakeholders, from Pacific governments, non-governmental organisations, industry and academia meet to have meaningful conversations that focus on sustainable tourism. To have wide-ranging and enduring influence, the vision, goals and strategies agreed upon should be formalised through an intergovernmental convention signed by nation states, obligating current and future governments to support tourism for sustainable development in the region. Government commitment is vital in ensuring that sustainable tourism development is achieved in a structured, collective and strategic manner regardless of changes in political custodianship. This is important to note because the political landscape of some South Pacific countries has been relatively volatile.

The South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) could potentially be the lead agency in establishing suitable spaces for consultation on a regional convention for sustainable tourism. While it was established as the Pacific tourism marketing body, it now also shoulders other tasks including the immense responsibility of promoting sustainable tourism development. However there are real challenges to SPTO strengthening regional cooperation around sustainable tourism because '…it represents competing destinations that are predominantly looking to secure visitation from the same source markets and they tend to be poorly differentiated with sun, sand, and sea as key themes in almost all cases' (Cheer et al 2018:5). Where SPTO could potentially add value through a regional convention for sustainable tourism is in enhancing the overall brand of Pacific tourism destinations, in a market where consumers are increasingly concerned about impacts on the environment and sustainable development. To do so convincingly, SPTO would also need to monitor whether governments and industry players were complying with the convention.

A Pacific framework for sustainable tourism development could be the catalyst for enhancing inter-governmental cooperation on issues ranging from transport to conservation, by enticing commitment in pursuing a fairer and just tourism sector. Regional cooperation and binding agreements may foster long-term political will and commitment in initialising the required legal and policy changes to encourage greater involvement of local entities in tourism ownership and management. Tourism policies in the region have to date left tourism development and its sustainability to the discretion of ever changing governments in the context of intense competition from the private sector. Therefore, having a regional convention on tourism outlining a shared strategy could pave the way for the development of a tourism industry that inherently supports conservation of Pacific Island resources and the economic well-being of its people.

Regional organisations, governments, development agencies and tourism businesses alike should take inspireation from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) when seeking to devise policies and actions to enable more sustainable forms of tourism development. While there is not the space here to fully articulate the possibilities within the 17 goals and numerous targets associated with the SDGs, the following give some idea of directions that could be taken. Engaging with SDG 2 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture' could lead to hotels, resorts and cruise ships seeking more contracts with local suppliers of food products. Shortening the supply chain would save food miles (contributing to SDG 13 on combatting climate change) as well as enhancing local development prospects (SDG 1 on eliminating poverty). Attention to SDG 8 which promotes 'decent work for all' and 17 (partnerships for sustainable development) could be used to motivate trade unions and hoteliers to work together to offer better

employment conditions and more safe and secure jobs to those working in this sector. In addition, SDG 8 could guide initiatives to support small and medium-sized tourism entrepreneurs, through business mentorship and access to credit, leading to more local ownership of tourism. In light of the concerns about over tourism expressed earlier, it would be good to see private and public-sector agencies exploring the relevance of SDG 14 'Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development' (Scheyvens 2018).

In line with the remit of the SDGs, balancing social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable development is critical if tourism is to be an effective driver of development in the interests of the peoples, cultures and environments of the South Pacific. We have argued here that widespread consultation should inform the development of a regional convention to ensure that governments and industry players commit to strategic initiatives for the sustainable development of tourism.

Notes

1 Northern Pacific tourism destinations such as Palau, FSM and Hawai'i will not be considered in this paper.

2 There are exceptions, however. For example, Cook Islands and Samoa have higher rates of local ownership of tourism enterprises, or joint ventures, than do other South Pacific countries. Some of these enterprises are small to medium-sized, such as the Samoan beach fales, but they are nevertheless important, locally-controlled businesses which offer great value to families and communities.

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